



Francis Stuart

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REFERENCES

Kevin Kiely, *Francis Stuart: Artist and Outcast*, Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2008, paper. VII +365 p., ISBN 978-1905785254, €22.95

- 1 A quarter-century of a friendship between a student and an elderly author frames this authorized biography of Stuart. His marriage to Maud Gonne's daughter Iseult, contentious relationship with Yeats, and imprisonment for anti-Treaty gunrunning earned this troubled young poet attention even before his stint in WWII Berlin. His broadcasts from the Nazi capital gained him infamy, his alleged collaboration and purported anti-Semitism continued to rile critics a half-century later, and he remained to the end of his long life, as Kiely's subtitle situates Stuart, opposed to conformity.
- 2 Kiely unravels what earlier studies, a short 1974 monograph by Jerry Natterstad and a basic 1990 life by Geoffrey Elborn, could not have revealed. With access to previously closed Department of Foreign Affairs files on Stuart copied from originals (destroyed in Berlin) by the Irish Legation who tracked him, and with intimate knowledge from long conversations over the decades, Kiely depicts a respectful, never fawning or ingratiating, portrait of enigmatic Stuart. Although lacking lengthy analysis of his fiction and other writings, it replaces Anne McCartney's erratic 2000 thesis for a spare survey of Stuart's literary production over nearly eight decades. Perhaps after Kiely's arrangement of first-hand reporting building upon previous criticism and archival records, in-depth investigation into Stuart's fiction may progress more confidently.
- 3 After introducing Kiely's relationship with Stuart, the book moves chronologically. Thirty-three chapters divide up a life beginning in 1902, when his father, a struggling emigrant from Antrim to Australia, committed suicide. Stuart's mother took him back to Co Meath; he was raised in British boarding schools. He dropped out of Rugby, and early on displayed an inability to settle down. Before he was eighteen, he courted Iseult Gonne,

who already at twenty-five had fended off two of Yeats's marriage proposals and had been a lover of Ezra Pound.

- 4 Kiely glosses over, oddly given his subject's iconoclasm, Stuart's sudden conversion before eighteen to Catholicism; his father was of Ulster Presbyterian stock and his mother from a British Loyalist military family. Sexually inexperienced, spiritually yearning, Stuart sought Iseult's glamour even as he recoiled from Yeats's grasp. Before nineteen, Stuart fathered a daughter, Kay; he was off at Maud's Glenmalure cottage "trying to write and awaiting a permit for his motorcycle when he received the news by telegram" of her birth. (50)
- 5 Kiely asserts that the "core events of Stuart's life" began only after the death of Yeats. Iseult suggested her unhappy husband travel to Berlin on an academic exchange program in April 1939. His biographer reiterates how Maud and Iseult "can be accurately portrayed as typical of a minority of Irish people who were also pro-German because they were anti-British." (119) Kiely carefully cites Stuart's distaste for Hitler.
- 6 Stuart's German years have been documented extensively, but Kiely adds details from copies of wartime files kept by the Irish government. The complications of Iseult's affair with a doomed German spy, while Stuart took a mistress, and commenced radio talks transmitted to Ireland, challenge elucidation. Kiely accepts that those charging Stuart with Nazi support can be justified, but Kiely rejects an equation with "sympathizer" for Stuart. "The issue of collaborator and traitor is another matter." (137); such diplomacy permeates this biography.
- 7 The death of his daughter Kay was followed by a Channel 4 documentary about the Holocaust. His interviewer implied that Stuart's residence in Berlin was anti-Semitic. In late 1996, Máire Mhac an tSaoi, wife of Conor Cruise O'Brien, rallied for Stuart's resignation from Aósdana. The motion fizzled when few of his peers supported Stuart's expulsion; Mhac an tSaoi herself left the guild. A suitably penitent Stuart, "after over a year of media frenzy, publicly repudiated any "imputed tendencies to anti-Semitism," Kiely remarks, "in his person or his writings." (312).
- 8 Nearly 98, after coming down with a Christmas flu, he died in 2002 in an Ennis hospital; "just on his last breath he opened his eyes so wide, as if at last he had seen something revelatory." (326-27) Kiely reports that *The Irish Times* reported his place of death as his flat at Fanore, another case of printed invention ending this author's long tussle with unequivocal fact.